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George Devey, Model for a stable block, 1873 (photo: Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018)



Building in models

Matthew Wells explores how a little-known Devey model reveals changing ideas and approaches to design.



Walter Godfrey, the first of George Devey's (1820-86) biographers, argued in 1907 that Devey held 'a natural and artistic balance of the masses of building'.

Where did this characteristic come from? The late Dr. Jill Allibone, whose monograph is the fundamental source for any scholarship on the topic, suggested that Devey did not produce many 'seductive' presentation drawings. Instead, Dr. Allibone suggested, Devey relied on models to show clients what the buildings would look like.

The importance of architectural models for Devey's work was well understood by the Victorian architectural profession. Many contemporary architects believed that relationship between Devey's buildings and models was a reciprocal one. For instance, a few days after Devey died in November 1886, at a meeting of the RIBA, Richard Phené Spiers suggested that without models of Devey's buildings, 'it was impossible to understand the power of design and fertility of imagination which characterised all his works'.

Who made and paid for architectural models is a key part of understanding their value as historical evidence. Unlike many of his colleagues who used professional model-makers, however, Devey appeared to have had models made within the confines of his office at 16 Great Marlborough Street in Soho. James Williams, Devey's assistant and then partner, noted in a biographical lecture given in 1909 that the office featured 'one modeller in constant work'.

Three models and several drawings for models survive. Notably two surviving models

relate to Devey's work at Barton Manor, a seventeenth-century manor house, located half a mile to the southeast of Osborne on the Isle of Wight, which was purchased by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1845. Devey was introduced to Queen Victoria through her daughter, Princess Louise who commissioned Devey to refashion an existing stable block at Barton Manor. Devey and Williams travelled to Osborne at the end of July 1873 to attend lunch with the Queen and various members of the Royal Family. Devey was asked to attend again the following day to discuss the work at Barton Manor. Whilst the Queen was absent from this second meeting, Devey discussed the proposed alterations and additions to Barton Manor with Princess Louise and the Duke of Argyll.

Devey and Williams brought two stout wooden boxes with them from the office at 16 Great Marlborough Street in Soho, which survive at Osborne. Housed within each box is an architectural model on a removable base, held in place with a catch and a dowel that fits into a socket on the opposite side of the case. Both models and cases have been stamped with Devey's name and business address. The first represents the existing manor house and adjoining buildings, whilst the second model depicts the moment of Devey's intervention at the intersection between a proposed entranceway and the existing stable block. Formally the first model shows us the various roof forms of the manor house and stables, and the distinctive figure of the chimneystacks, grouped into fours on the house and paired on the stables. Red wash has been applied to the wooden chimneys to show their brick construction. Elsewhere the

elevations have been drawn onto the wooden blocks of the model in pencil, which gives the model a graphic quality.

Whilst the first model would allow Princess Louise and the Duke of Argyll to understand the formal and organisational arrangement of Devey's proposals, the second model offered a more detailed portrayal of the interventions and a glimpse at the interior of the stable block. In particular the model shows how the new open gable of an entranceway will intersect with the existing roof hip. There is no material distinction made between existing and proposed. Instead all of the model is roughly made from pine lengths and sheets screwed together with flat-head screws or nailed with tacks.

In the example of Barton Manor and the absence extensive documentary evidence, the two travelling models themselves offer suggestions as to how Devey used models in the course of his professional practice in order to examine the outline and massing of his design, and later communicate these aspects to his patrons. The first model offered an overall view of his proposed interventions to Barton Manor in relation to the existing buildings. A second, larger model was used to both examine this formal massing at a larger scale and also represent parts of the building's interior. In the corpus of surviving Victorian architectural models, these two examples raise questions regarding portability of models as a part of professional practice, the interrelationship between drawings and form on the model's surface, and the technical qualities of model-making itself.